

**Open Letter Regarding the Mismanagement of the
South Atlantic Fishery Management Council**

February 11, 2010

I have been commercial fishing full time for over forty (40) years before there were any fishing regulations. Our type of fishing is commonly called "bandit boat fishing". It used to be referred to as a "snapper boat"! Red snapper was all we fished for. There were the old timer producers, such as The Virginia, The Snapper Queen, The Restless, and The Night Hawk. Unfortunately these boats decimated the red snapper population in the north east Florida area. The landing became less and less, to the point we had to diversify into the other fisheries. We began targeting vermillion snapper, mangrove snapper, mutton snapper, grouper, red porgy, cobia, kings, amberjack and trigger fish. Most of the old timers couldn't convert to these other fisheries, so when they couldn't make a living snapper fishing they just retired or quit, reducing pressure on all species.

In 1976 I received information that congress had created the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council. I thought this is great; at last we're going to receive fisheries management tools that will bring back the red snapper stocks. For the first year or so, the council's actions were fairly good, mostly establishing size limits for the commercial and recreational fisheries. After some adjusting on these limits they finally got it right, except for red snapper. I feel twenty (20) inches is too large to reach a decent survival rate; sixteen (16) inches would work well. Red snapper recovered because of less targeting of the species as well as size limits and bag limits imposed on the recreational fisheries. The red snapper fishery is stronger now than when I first started fishing. There has probably been more snapper landed in the past three (3) years than was landed in the previous ten (10) years. Would the catches have been as good in 2010 as 2009? Probably not; as fish seem to run in multi-year cycles and are greatly affected by the movement of bait, water temperature and storms. Of course, we will never know with this closure and pending closures.

I will give the SAFMC credit for a few things; they stopped the trawlers from dragging for fish (that one action saved the vermillion fishery, as these boats were bringing in three hundred (300) count vermilions and were wiping out the juvenile stock. They implemented good size limits and they imposed bag limits, which I feel is a little restricted for the recreational community. I was a recreational fisherman and diver long before I started commercial fishing and I know what it's like to work all week and look forward to the weekend or a day off to go fishing. I served three years as a snapper grouper advisory panel member for the SAFMC. Unfortunately, the council members rarely listened to someone who actually fished for a living. If they did, they never acted on our recommendations. I have no problem with the staff members of the SAFMC, they will bend over backwards to help you! Over the years I have witnessed the following:

1. One individual in South Carolina had the clout to influence the council to stop the power heading of fish in FEDERAL waters off the coast of South Carolina (the only state in SAFMC

jurisdiction to have such a law). If this was really a problem why wasn't it stopped in the federal waters of the other states?

2. The unrestricted cobia fishery was reduced to a two per person bag limit; not because of some stock assessment problems, but because of a conflict between charter boat fisherman and recreational fisherman in south Florida.
3. The unrestricted amberjack fishery goes from a size limit (36 inches) to a one month closure, then to a one million pound yearly quota, to a one thousand pound trip limit even though the yearly quota had never been achieved! (Again no scientific data that this fishery was in trouble).
4. The vermilion snapper fishery, which is the commercial fishing industry strongest fishery was reduced to a quota of 315,523 lbs. (January – June) and 302,523 lbs. (June – January). This fishery should have at least double this quota as I believe this fishery cannot be depleted or hindered by a hook and line fishery (the juvenile stock will not be hurt because of the protection of size limits and no trawling). There are no other user groups, no bottom long lines and certainly no spear fishing.

Every time the council puts restrictions on one fishery, it reflects to more pressure being put on the other fisheries and the problems then have a snow balling affect. There are other tools that can be used in place of a closure. I favor trip limits.

We all want and need good regulations, good science and good landing information and record keeping. We all want a sustainable commercial and recreational fishery to be there for future generations. We acknowledge the fish are a natural resource belonging to all the people of this great nation.

All the council members that have ever served in the SAFMC are very intelligent, well educated individuals, but it doesn't not take a rocket scientist to manage a fishery. It takes and needs knowledgeable, experienced commercial and recreational fisherman as council members. At the present time, out of thirteen council members there is only one commercial fisherman. We should be the majority, not the minority. With all this being said, I believe that over the years the SAFMC has become an out- of-control political catastrophe, which need to be abolished, reformed and restructured. How can one set of regulations control the diversity of a fishery from the Virginia border through the tropical waters of the Florida Keys?

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